

Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies

Inaugural Lecture

There is no doubt that as citizens of Sri Lanka we can legitimately be proud of this day on which the Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies has been ceremonially declared open. It is our duty and an obligation we owe to the unborn generations of Sri Lanka to make this event not second in significance to the arrival of Thera Mahinda in this country. It is we, as the residents of Sri Lanka, who inherited the teachings of the Buddha within the first two hundred years before its original identity began to disappear in India, in the land where the birth, attainment of enlightenment and final passing away took place.

By the time of Emperor Asoka, Buddhism in India had already split up into different sects on account of doctrinal differences. It is also true that the original standards of the prestigious order of monks were somewhat on the decline. Nevertheless, the great elders who counselled the Emperor, on account of their profound scholarship and scrupulous academic soundness, transformed the existing version of Buddhism to approach as near as possible to the original teachings of the Buddha, before it was dispatched to the world outside. In consequence of this, the Pali Tripiṭaka which was brought to Sri Lanka by the Elder Mahinda and was subsequently committed to writing in this country during the reign of King Vaṭṭagāminī Abhaya, is believed by a considerable body of Buddhist scholars to be the oldest texts that approximate to the original teachings of the Buddha.

Therefore we, who have inherited a religious and cultural heritage which is believed to be adequate to serve world needs, should have set up an Institute of Buddhist Research in this country well over fifty years ago. It is my intention today to make a few brief indications on this subject. We should, however, not only be glad that such an Institute has now been set up during our life time but,

also offer our grateful thanks to those who pioneered this project.

Many would be inclined to consider research as a characteristic feature of the modern age. But to the Buddhist, it is a concept that reaches far back to the Buddha himself. Besides, the Buddhist concept of research embodies a distinct feature which is not always shared by other researchers. To the Buddhist, research is a real and penetrating search, a search for the discovery of truth, to gain mastery over facts about ourselves and the world around us. This search is undertaken and this discovery is pursued so that our lives would be made totally meaningful, and real peace and happiness would be brought within the reach of man. In a world overshadowed and darkened with selfish motivations, common problems of mankind are viewed and seen through an unjustifiably narrowed view point. Therefore the ethics, economics and political ideologies that are being evolved for the good of mankind are the products of groping in this limited visibility. For the same reason they tended to be until very recent times unrelated disciplines, unrelated to realities of life on earth and bereft of any sound value judgements. But with almost other-worldly divine sanctions, they claim for themselves an arrogant independence.

According to Buddhism, the discoveries made by man and the values and norms set up by him should all contribute for the uplift of man, and not for his destruction or degradation. Buddhism here unhesitatingly remarks that it is the knowledge of the fool that stands for self destruction [*Yāvad' eva anattaya ñattaṃ bālassa jayate. Hanti balassa sukkaṃsaṃ muddhaṃ assa nipātayaṃ.* Dhp. v.72].

Scientific knowledge and technological skills of man should not bring in their wake pollution of his environment. Much less should there be room for the competitive massacre of mankind, openly or in secret. What we should like to stress here at the very outset is that all research and all widening out of frontiers of knowledge carried out under Buddhist norms or in a Buddhist environment should not turn its back on justice or ignore ethics and moral considerations. In

making analyses or propounding theories, the Buddhists have to keep these convictions in the forefront.

In this respect, it could be claimed that Gotama the Buddha, over 2500 years ago embarked on a unique research project of far reaching consequence. Both on account of the motivation which led him to this and the manner in which he conducted it, he deserves a unique place in human history. Seeing the problem of man, his physical and mental maladjustment in the world, the Buddha broke through all barriers of time, place, race and creed. He was not to work for a chosen few. His was a universal mission.

The problem being both mental and physical, he was not content with finding a way only for the equitable distribution of food and clothing. Prescribing for these basic problems which are at the physical level, he delved deeper into the mental problem too. This was his total search, a research for the discovery of peace for the body and the mind. Thus his findings have turned out to be a universal solution to a human problem, applicable at all times and in all places.

As we take a peep into methods he adopted, we find that he did not submit himself to any tradition. Having tested some of them himself, he found them to be stultifying. With a remarkable freshness of outlook he adopted a method which could be characterised as being scientific. Rejecting tradition and hearsay, he adopted the method of causal analysis, the result of which was the formulation of the theory of *Pratītyasamutpāda* or **Causal Genesis**. Pointing out the psycho-physical interaction of the human phenomenon, the Buddha pointed out that the termination of *dukkha* or unsatisfactoriness inherent in the life process of the world lay in the reconciliation of our very attachment to it. However, I cannot afford to go into a detailed analysis of Buddhist doctrines here.

At this stage let us focus attention on two things. First, that Buddhist principles and the Buddhist pattern of thinking are sufficiently broad-based without sectarian discrimination on the basis of colour or creed, time or place to

be able to contribute to the highest development and greatest achievement of mankind as a whole. Therefore no matter where the Buddhist Research Institute is set up, one has nevertheless the conviction that the essence of Buddhism which filters through it could be utilised for the solution of problems of man anywhere. Second, that the ideas expressed in Buddhism about man and human nature and the conclusions derived therefrom are both in conformity with scientific thinking and acceptable anywhere internationally without any regional conflicts or contradictions.

While the transcendental goal of Nirvana in Buddhism is the ultimate solution to the problem of suffering, the path indicated for the attainment of this goal certainly makes the world here and now a much happier place, both for man and animal to live in. This is so because the way to *nibbāna* requires of every man a harmonious adjustment of his life, both internally and externally. The interrelation between these two, namely the final bliss of Nirvana and the happiness in this worldly life, until its attainment, becomes evident on a sensible and careful analysis of the Noble Eightfold Path which is the only way laid down for its attainment.

In Buddhism, it is not through divine grace that man transcends the world but by harnessing the physical and mental potential that exists within man. It is for this reason that in the aspiration for the attainment of this goal the ethical, social, economic and other considerations which influence the life of man have to be integrated and be made to accord with the Buddhist way of life. Discipline in the life of the Buddhist is thus manifold, covering both worldly and transcendental interests. Both monks and laymen have to regulate their lives with the attainment of the *nibbānic* goal in view. This is the Buddhism which comes to be accepted and confirmed on the basis of life experience. It seeks no support from beliefs. It is in this light that Buddhism was introduced to the Kālāmas by the Buddha [See AN. I.188 ff.].

When one appreciates the nature of the goal of Buddhism and the basis of its

entire religious structure, there arises the question whether Buddhism should be placed in the general category of religions. This is a very relevant question, particularly at a time when social scientists of diverse sorts enthusiastically come forward to review and evaluate religions and religious institutions. Buddhism cannot be included in the category of religions which had their origins restricted to time and place. With the progress of scientific knowledge and the increase of philosophical maturity in the world, such religions have necessarily to lend themselves to internal corrections and adjustments.

Buddhism, on the other hand, is the result of a more basic analysis and a fundamental awareness. That is why the teachings of Buddhism gained the name of Noble Truths or *ariya sacca*. Prompted by diverse disciplines, when researchers speak of evolution of religion, one has to keep in mind this special characteristic of Buddhist teachings. One would then not fail to see the differences between evolution and perversion, between the original image and its distortion. It is because of this confusion that one finds sociologists and students of religion making rash and sometimes ludicrous statements about Buddhist ethics, Buddhist social philosophy and Buddhist monasticism.

But the Buddhists have had a sound tradition in scholarship. I have already referred to the Buddhist reforms carried out during the time of Emperor Asoka. This was possible and became a reality because of the soundness of judgement of the scholar - monks who were the students of the day. This, in fact, is a Buddhist tradition that goes back to the Buddha himself. In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta he has laid down the four *mahā-padesa* [DN.II.123 ff.] in which he gives the criteria for the determination of the correctness of statements made about the Dhamma and the Vinaya, i.e. the body of doctrinal teachings and the code of monastic discipline. Here he ruled out the possibility of having to yield at a later date to pressure from groups or to the prestige of personalities.

It is the standardised texts of the Dhamma and the Vinaya whose authenticity had been accepted and agreed upon that were to serve as the norm. History

provides ample proof of the fact that throughout the long history of Buddhism, sound scholarship and mature judgement has, from time to time, come to its rescue both during times of decline from within and assaults from forces outside. The decision to reject as unworthy the ten disputed points [*dasa vatthūni*] at the second Buddhist council is evidence of the growth of a stable academic tradition based on the norms of the *mahāpadesa* enunciated in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, already referred to above.

I made a special point to make these observations about Buddhist teachings and their evolution because I consider it a special function of the Institute set up today to make a scientific historical analysis of Buddhist thought. Consequent evaluation and assessment is definitely more difficult than the analysis. But if Buddhist thought is to be a living force in the world today, contributing its share to the happiness of the world, this analysis and this evaluation which I refer to must necessarily be attempted. Many would prefer not to face this problem. The results of the analysis may prove to be unpleasant or even irritating. But divorced from norms and standards, there is no path to progress. Without such analysis one would not know truth from falsehood, and would even lose sight of the much desired goal.

History reveals such confusion of values in religions of the world. In the history of civilization, this appears to be the result of the impact of two levels of social strata, a higher and lower. Twenty years ago, Robert Redfield introduced this notion as the 'great tradition' and the 'little tradition.' The little tradition is the thrust from unsophisticated village level. It is primitive, simple and might even be coarse and crude.

Both in India where Buddhism appeared and in the lands including Sri Lanka to which it subsequently spread, there were village level societies which were capable of giving rise to the little tradition. From what we have discovered so far it would be evident that Buddhism appears as the 'great tradition.' Through its contact with life in the village, it is inevitable that a 'little tradition' emerges out of

or beside the 'great tradition.' It could even be explained as the fulfilment of a social need, In turn, the 'great tradition ' begins to nurture within itself some of the features of the 'little tradition.' What is of significance to us is to determine the extent of damage or corrosion it causes to the 'great tradition.' Here we see no need or no reason to hesitate or fight shy of making value judgements in this context.

A study of the history of Buddhism in different parts of the world reveals the fact that both monks and laymen, at different stages in different parts of the world, have adopted, or rather adapted new ideas, making necessary changes in such a way as not to damage the fundamental thesis of the religion.

Whatever that comes to be accommodated within a creed under social or any other pressure does not need to be accepted for all times. This is particularly true of whatever the 'little tradition' thrusts into the 'great tradition'. It is for the 'great tradition' to safeguard its ideals. The peripheral structure that grows around the great tradition, in the name of national or cultural appendages, would not necessarily damage the core. They would survive only as concessions within the major scheme. Here a major determinant, with favourable or unfavourable results as the case may be, would be the intellectual and philosophical maturity of the adherents of the creed.

Almost at the start, I did stress analysis, examination and research as part of true Buddhist tradition. But these find expression in the lives of people only to the degree of development of their own intellect, which in turn is an expression of their restraint in body and mind. This is where Buddhist *sīla* and *samādhi* play their major role in in the true uplift of a culture, both personal and national. We know of Buddhist monasteries in Sri Lanka, in the distant past, where a teacher and his pupils carried on academic discussions and debates and settled disputes with mutual respect that is worthy of any seat of higher learning anywhere in the world. Thus we can claim that in Sri Lanka we have had the necessary academic atmosphere at its highest level. It is not to be denied, however, that it has

perhaps left us temporarily. But it is within our power to retrieve it and nurture it again.

In the history of the world today and in the world of learning in particular, a healthy and wholesome spirit of learning is an urgent need. Therefore may I now address myself to you, venerable sirs, the Sangha of Sri Lanka, who are the accredited custodians of learning, i.e. of the Buddhist texts: **Dhammadharā Vinayadharā Mātikādhara Tēṭṭakā Bhāṇakā** or whoever else they be. Without such mastery over the texts, the Dhamma would not survive: *Pariyattim vinā dhammo na tiṭṭhati kudācanaṃ*.

It is not that the laymen are incapable of it. The Buddhists everywhere believe that you should be more qualified to do it. If the educational, social and monastic organization of the *Sāsana* today is not conducive to this, pray Sirs, hasten to re-organise it. If it were possible to reckon and recognise in our midst a large body of persons who have learnt and know the Pali texts and the commentaries, then the work of the Institute we established today would be considerably facilitated. Without that foundation,, that basic requirement, it would be futile to attempt comparative studies on Chinese and Tibetan versions of Buddhism or Buddhist texts. We must not fail to take note of the fact that it is very important to make, at the very outset, internal comparative studies of Pali texts in relation to their commentaries and sub-commentaries. It will then become evident that not only in terms of the Buddhist doctrines, but also in terms of the Buddhist Vinaya, meaningful reforms should be launched today as was done in the time of Emperor Asoka.

I should now add that the learning of Pali and Buddhist texts, for professional advantage or otherwise, should extend to the laymen as well. It is lamentable if the study of Pali cannot be integrated to the structure of higher education in this country in a manner that safeguards the prestige of both the subject and the persons who pursue its study. A serious study of Buddhism and Buddhist civilization at the higher education level can be attempted only with such a

background. I should also add that even at this late stage of Buddhist research in Sri Lanka, one should, as a first step, initiate the study of Buddhist Sanskrit texts. If one complains that this would do violence to the teachings of Theravada Buddhism, one has then to point out that this would happen only on the failure of teacher and pupil to make a correct assessment of the contents of their studies.

One last word about the Institute itself. We consider that the work of this Institution should proceed without any conceivable delay. Its message to the world is long overdue. We need for this a team of efficient and enterprising scholars. Perhaps there is no paucity of such persons. But we regret to record that the academic environment and the public attitude that would contribute to dedicated service by such men, on a long term project like this, have hardly shown themselves in our midst today. However, these are not insurmountable difficulties that need darken our horizon or obstruct our path. It is time now even for personal sacrifices. We are aware that considerable assistance for the building up of the Institute is forthcoming. But it is no easy task to make this Institute meet all the demands made by students of Buddhism, coming to it both from the East and the West. It is our hope and we wish that the people of Sri Lanka make it the worthy Institution it deserves to be.

[Lecture delivered as Professor Jotiya Dhirasekera Editor-in-Chief, Encyclopaedia of Buddhism.]

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